

# A Tale of Four Stars

by lnsanity

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Summary: Halo/ME/Star Wars/Warhammer 40K: Four universes collide in a storm of brilliance and violence, unexpected circumstances arise. A threat to all emerges, but who among the four galaxies might hope to triumph? Slight AU. Note: This is my first time ever writing fanfiction.

## 1. Prologue

**\*\*Prologue: The Library\*\***

\_(Note: This is an introduction and not truly part of the story.)\_

It was always cold.

Oh, it was never freezing, nor was it even as cold as the chill of a winter morning. No, it was a mild cold, like the faint brush of autumn winds, just enough to leave you mildly uncomfortable, but not enough to make one shudder.

Not that he shuddered, not he.

Of course, the fact that he had never shuddered in his long life may have had something to do with the fact that he perpetually cloaked himself in a long, thick robe the color of midnight, even though no weather reached him within his sanctuary. No discomfort could reach him within the long dusty halls of his abode, but for the mild chill.

On this very night, the robed man had been making his way down one of the endless aisles of his home, grumbling at the mild cold, wishing that he had had the foresight to have brought his hooded cloak with him when he had departed his chambers, when all of a sudden, he stopped.

The Library had spoken.

The Library had many names. The Infinite Archives, the Vault of Endless Wisdom, the Knowing-Place â€" all these were but a few of the names that many had known the Library by in the long, long time that it had stood. Its one and only permanent inhabitant, however, had his own term for his majestic yet neglected home â€" the Reading Room.

For it was the Keeper of the Library's due to wander endlessly among the ancient tomes and texts, to protect them and keep them, and to use the wisdom they provided with care. The Keeper was well aware that his tenure in the Library would be lasting for a very long time, and what better way was there to while away the ages of time beyond count by reading?

If there was one thing that the Keeper loved, it would be the joy of reading. His old, wrinkled face bore two bright eyes, nimble and shining, like two polished pearls that had been inserted into a prune. He loved reading, and his eyes would endlessly devour the pages of the books that had been entrusted to his care. The Library knew his love, and often guided him to volumes of particular interest. In return, the Keeper maintained the books of the Library and added to its collection. As such, the Keeper fed the Library, and the Library fed the Keeper.

Sometimes, however, the Library would have a request. It would speak to the Keeper, whispering lightly in his ear, bidding him to accomplish some task or another. Today, however, was different. The whisper was urgent, as if the Library was agitated.

The Keeper listened to the words of his friend attentively, brows wrinkled more than they usually were in a slight frown, his discomfort over the persistent chill forgotten. As the whisper faded, he nodded energetically, and quickly set off to find one particular tome.

Striding swiftly between the tall, handsome bookshelves that made up the halls of the Library, the Keeper muttered under his breath as he counted the aisles. With a grimace, he noticed that spiders had once again taken up residence in the Forty-Ninth Aisle of Debated Succor, and resolved to alert his helper ravens to clear the infestation out as soon as he had completed the task that the Library had set before him.

"Two-hundred eighty-six, sixty-thousand nine-hundred and twenty-two, Nine million and â€" ah, this must be it!"

The Keeper, having located his quarry, moved into a particularly narrow corridor, lined by books, as every aisle was. Running his long, thin fingers over the spines of the ancient tomes, he read their names as he searched for the one volume that the Library had bid him find.

"The Phoenix and the Snake, no, no, finished that one ages ago. Not the Turbulent Histories of the Seven Kingdoms, either, no. Stories of the Ringbearers? Not that, either. Ah!"

The Keeper exclaimed happily as he pulled a thick tome out of its resting place beside its brothers and sisters in triumph. Brushing off the dusty cover, a title written in gilded letters could be

read.

\_A Tale of Four Stars\_.

Taking the thick book, the Keeper once again breezed off, walking quickly. The Library had spoken and had asked him to Read it.

"Coeus, Eidyia! Spiders again, on the forty-ninth of Debated Succor! Clear them out, now, go!" The old man waved his hand at a pair of ravens as he entered his study, causing the two to flap their wings noisily and fly off in the direction of the doomed nest of spiders.

Not pausing to watch the progress of his helpers, the Keeper busied himself with preparing for the Reading. Lighting dozens of candles around the room, the beauty of the study was thrown into sharp relief. Crystals floated in midair, unsupported by any conventional means, reflecting the candlelight. Intricately-carved furniture could be found standing around in a rather random fashion, as if their user paid little attention to their placement (which was true). On the walls were carved uncountable numbers of artwork, all woven together into one majestic tapestry, rising up high into the air and disappearing beyond naked sight. On the far side of the door was a great window, painted with stained-glass, depicting constantly-shifting scenes, that if one were to look into, would show the viewer countless facades of immeasurable beauty, though afterwards the beholder could never remember what exactly it was that their eyes had seen.

In the center of this intricate and lavish room lay a simple wooden lectern, standing upon a raised dais. It was to this rather common-looking implement that the Keeper stepped. Very carefully, he laid the book upon the smooth surface of the lectern, worn and polished by countless years of usage.

He gingerly lifted up the first page and began to read.

## 2. Chapter One - Arrival

**\*\*Chapter One â€" Arrival\*\***

\_/\_AUTOMATED REROUTE UNSC SHIP REG-244812 GYF\_/\_

\_/\_FILES ACCESS GRANTED\_/\_

\_/\_WORM-PROTOCOL FIREWALL ENABLED/FILE ERASED/\_/\_

\_/\_ONI Priority Transmission XX421A-XX\_/\_

\_/\_Encryption Code: Gamma\_/\_

\_/\_Public Key: N/A\_/\_

\_/\_Date: October 15, 2642 (Unified Earth Calendar)\_/\_

\_/\_From: Code Name Locksmith\_/\_

\_/\_To: Director Han\_/\_

\_Subject: Report for Investigation of Anomaly E02\_

\_Classification: EYES ONLY, TOP SECRET\_

\_REDISTRIBUTION OR RELEASE OF MATERIAL TO UNAUTHORIZED PERSONS IN ANY MANNER WILL RESULT IN EXECUTION OR PERMANENT CONFINEMENT, AS PER ONI DIRECTIVE B-94\_

\_/FILE EXTRACTION-RECONSTITUTION COMPLETE/\_

\_/START FILE/\_

\_Sir, the initial investigation for what we have dubbed Anomaly E02 has been concluded.\_

\_We have found no sign of Battle Group 18. Due to the fact that the Anomaly was located in the precise area of their predicted exit-point, our team theorizes that either the task force was destroyed by unknown means which may or may not be related to the Anomaly, or have entered into the Anomaly. It may even be possible that the Anomaly was created by their Slipspace signature. How this might have come to pass is currently unknown.\_

\_The Anomaly remained open for only a short period of time (2 hours, twenty minutes, and six seconds) after initial investigation, but preliminary analysis of leftover radiation and other factors lead us to one conclusion.\_

\_Anomaly E02 is directly related to Project BEYOND THE VEIL.\_

\_The results of our team's work and subsequent conclusions are attached. Further analysis is highly recommended. Data gained in our investigation may be helpful in furthering Project BEYOND THE VEIL.\_

\_Our team awaits further instructions.\_

\_/FILE-ATTACHMENT "ONIS3-REPORT02144"/\_

\_/END FILE/\_

\_/SCRAMBLE-DESTRUCTION PROCESS ENABLE/\_

\_PRESS ENTER TO CONTINUE\_

\*\*1450 Hours, November 2, 2642 (Unified Earth Calendar)\*\*

\*\*UNSC \*\*\_\*\*Shadow\*\*\_\*\*-Class Stealth Destroyer\*\*\_\*\* Checkmate\*\*\_\*\*, Slipspace\*\*

Military food tasted bad. It always did, regardless of whatever technological advancements engineers and scientists threw at the problem. The taste would always be a little off, the texture strange. The simple fact was that a mix of optimized nutrients and supplementary ingredients would never taste as fantastic as a freshly-grilled steak, crispy and juicy in all the right spots. It was never just \_right\_.

To Alan Blake, it tasted like home.

It had been too long since he'd been in a proper military installation. Ever since his recruitment into the Office of Naval Intelligence's VENATOR Program, his deployments had ranged from safeguarding secret ONI facilities to surgical strikes against Insurrection strongholds. For the past three years, he had been stationed on ONI's Sanctum Base on the reclaimed Reach, as security. The mixed civilian-military staff of the base had prompted ONI to supply regular cuisine instead of military grub. While undeniably tastier, it was just soâ€¦| \_normal\_.

Military rations reminded Alan of his past days as an Orbital Drop Shock Trooper, when he had fought beside his brothers-and-sisters-in-arms. It wasn't that he enjoyed killing, as such â€” no sane man, in his opinion, took joy in the taking of life. The death of friends and comrades was also hard, though he had put old pains behind him.

It was the pride of being part of the ODSF divisions that drew him. The thrill of combat, knowing that your skills would determine whether one survived or not. The comradeship between fellow ODSFs, knowing that you could trust them to watch your back. The adrenaline of the drop, the feeling of a rifle's recoil as it fired. Alan found no joy in killing, but he certainly had enjoyed fighting as an ODSF.

Being a Venator was different. The VENATOR Program had been set up in secret to supply elite troops for ONI's personal usage. They were the knife that hid in the dark in order to slit an enemy's throat, the bullet that would take an opponent's life from a kilometer away in order to avert a war. They conducted black ops, provided security for secret facilities, and did whatever ONI asked of them. Once the legendary SPARTANS had become icons of humanity's hope against the now defunct Covenant, ONI realized that they would need a separate force that would conduct operations that could not be relegated to the high-profile SPARTAN-IIs, missions that would destroy the UNSC's reputation if they ever came to light. And so, the VENATOR Program was initiated.

During the Great War, Venator teams had been secretly deployed to take out Insurrection targets. The Insurrection had been taken off guard, as they had been focused on preparing for possible Covenant attacks, and many of their assets had been destroyed, both military and civilian. Other Venator teams had been pointed in the direction of the Covenant, given Prowlers, and let loose, causing mayhem behind enemy lines. \_"No mercy, no hassle\_" were the Venators' standard M.O.

Alan had been recruited into the Venators eleven standard years ago, after a disastrous mission had left the rest of his ODSF squad either dead or in a deep coma, unlikely to ever wake up. ONI had approached him, and he had signed up, and had been serving as ONI's secret weapon for the last decade.

While it was true that he, as a Venator, had taken part in many combat operations, they were vastly different from his experience in the ODSF divisions. Venator teams were small and secret, often-times relying on stealth and silenced weapons. Tensions were always high, as discovery would mean death. Week-long missions would often cumulate in one final headshot from a sniper rifle. To Alan, this

side of warfare, while necessary for the survival of the UNSC, was not nearly as satisfying as work in the ODSs had been. Still, he did his utmost best in his assigned missions.

And now, his role as one of the elite Venators had taken him here, on board the UNSC stealth-destroyer Checkmate, escorting one of Section Three's civilian scientists. His last three days in Slipspace had been spent upgrading and cleaning his equipment in addition to training with the onboard simulators, and now he was taking the time to eat a quick meal at the shipboard mess-hall.

In the years after the end of the Great War and Covenant Civil War, humanity had made vast improvements to all aspects of their technology. Determined to never again fall victim to more advanced extraterrestrials, the UNSC had redoubled efforts to reclaim Forerunner technology, in addition to technological contributions from the Sangheili. The Infinity class of supercruisers were the first line of new warships to come from the research, and paved the way for many more. Stealth-destroyers became more common, and were equipped with Covenant stealth systems, allowing for visual invisibility. The Checkmate, utilizing its Forerunner-based Slipspace drive, could reach speeds up to one thousand and three hundred light-years per day, turning Slipspace jumps that would have taken a pre-War UNSC ship weeks to undertake into day-long journeys.

This increase in FTL speed also drastically reduced the need for cryogenic technology, which had originally been used to preserve passengers for long journeys. UNSC crews no longer had to enter cryosleep every time they initiated a lengthy jump, though most ship designs retained a cryotube chamber for emergency purposes.

Alan was glad for these advancements, for he did not like the idea of being put into hibernation every time he was deployed to a new assignment. Having been born at the end of the twenty-sixth century, he had narrowly avoided the last generation of human Slipspace drives that had required crews to be put into cryosleep.

Instead of being put into cryo-hibernation, Alan could instead entertain himself, train, and eat, much as he was doing right at this very moment. Swallowing a spoon of some ration-made stew he had forgotten to identify, he thought that it tasted vaguely like chicken.

But then everything tastes like chicken, he thought.

Mentally shrugging, he continued devouring his meal, faintly eavesdropping on nearby conversations between other UNSC personnel. It was a habit he had picked up in missions where he had been required to blend with civilians, and it served to keep him updated with rumors and current events among the UNSC crew.

"Alan," a voice said beside him, diverting his attention.

Dane Matthews, commanding officer of Alan's Tracker Team, sat himself down beside Alan, and set down a tray of his own, piled high with assorted foods.

"Dane," Alan greeted with raised eyebrows, "Are you honestly considering eating all that?"

"You know me," the other replied, "Eating is joy. Joy is life. Eating is life."

"That makes next to no sense. Don't forget, we're going to be deploying soon, if my internal clock is accurate."

"Ah," Dane managed to pause in the middle of devouring his victim, a bar of what was supposed to be bread but was rather more dense than real bread should have been, "That was one reason why I came down here."

"Somehow, I doubt you needed a reason other from the food," Alan finished off the last of his stew.

"Hey, I'm a growing boy," Dane protested, "Seriously, though. Embers wants us to assemble in the briefing room next to hangar six in one hour. We're dropping out of Slipspace at sixteen-hundred."

Alan considered this for a moment.

"See you in the briefing room, then. Got to pack up my gear."

Dane nodded, too immersed in his current activity of taking apart his pile of rations with the voracity of a starved wolf to reply.

So it was that Alan gathered his equipment and suited up in anticipation of deployment. Venator operatives were equipped with a heavily modified combat helmet along with a stripped-down version of the Mark X MJOLNIR Powered Assault Armor, capable of generating powerful shielding as well as boasting stealth capabilities. Its main downside was that it provided significantly less physical armor than standard MJOLNIR suits once shielding failed. Alan attached his assault rifle and sidearm to the suit's magnetic strips, then activated the helmet, causing it to assemble itself around his head and enabling the suit's neural interface. He felt a slight spike of cold in the base of his neck, which quickly faded.

After a quick rundown, Alan was confident that his suit was running at optimum capability, and made his way to the briefing room. ONI's line of \_Shadow\_-class stealth destroyers were equipped with a number of briefing rooms, handy when transporting and deploying multiple teams of operatives.

Entering the room, he saw that the other two members of Tracker Team had already arrived. Jin was a slim woman of Asian descent who wore her hair short, while Michael was blonde-haired and blue-eyed, boasting a heavily muscled build. Despite their appearances, Jin was the team's demolitions expert, and Michael was the team sniper, being the best shot out of the four. Both had already suited up, though their helmets were inactive, revealing each of their faces.

Jin chirped a greeting, while Michael merely nodded. The team had been together for years, and knew each other well.

"How'd the upgrades go?" Jin asked, as Alan sat down beside her.

"Eight percent increase in shot accuracy."

"Not bad," she grinned, "But it's still not going to save you the next time you get in a sniping competition with Michael."

Hearing this, the sniper snorted.

"Wasn't expecting it to," Alan rolled his eyes as he replied.

At that point, the door slid open again and three people walked in. First was Dane, clad in armor with weapons attached to his back. After him entered two other figures familiar to Alan.

Arthur Scaldman was the tall but somewhat spindly scientist that they were escorting. Slightly aristocratic features and two sharp eyes belied a dry sense of humor that Alan had picked up over the few times that they had met. Wearing a civilian suit, he looked the part of a well-off intellectual.

Beside him stood Kaya Embers, the ONI agent attached to the mission. She of was middling height and slight build, with hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her eyes were dark, and constantly observed her surroundings. Despite her petite appearance, Alan was well aware that she was the more dangerous of Tracker Team's two companions.

"Gentlemen and lady," Embers addressed the team as they stood.

"At sixteen hundred, we will arrive at the Fletcher Research Facility. You are to accompany me and Doctor Scaldman during our operation, providing security. You are not to wander off at any time, and orders will only be taken from me."

She paused for a moment, allowing the team to absorb her words.

"While the base is friendly, there are some uncertainties as to the progress of the mission. We may possibly encounter hostiles, in which case you may engage them at your own discretion. Lethal force is authorized. Further details will be elaborated once we enter the Fletcher Facility. Am I understood, operatives?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

\_That's strange,\_ Alan thought. \_This briefing's rather vague.\_

"Good. We should be dropping out of Slipspace any second now. Please accompany me and Doctor Scaldman to Hangar Six."

\*\*1600 Hours, November 2, 2642 (Unified Earth Calendar)\*\*

\*\*Orbit over X-912, (CLASSIFIED LOCATION)\*\*

Slipspace is the collective term for the eleven infinitesimal dimensions that the UNSC and the races of the former Covenant utilize in order to achieve faster-than-light travel. Slipspace drives function by creating ruptures between realspace and slipstream space, in order to allow ships to travel between them. The UNSC ships of the pre-War and Great War era accomplished this by essentially ripping a hole through Slipspace and realspace, which was discovered to be relatively inefficient and inaccurate.



The \_Checkmate\_'s Slipspace drive, based on technology recovered from long-abandoned Forerunner Shield Worlds, had no such disabilities.

If one were to have been observing the space around the orbit of the planet designated as X-912 at the moment of the \_Checkmate\_'s emergence, one would have seen a field of blinding, bluish-white energy grow into a cascading pattern out of nowhere, swirling in patterns that made no sense to the average human mind. In the center of this storm of light slipped out a construct of dark grey Forerunner-titanium alloy, five hundred meters constituting one of ONI's most powerful stealth ships.

The \_Checkmate\_ activated its main engines on the orders of its captain, and gracefully maneuvered itself into orbit around X-912, avoiding several rocky satellites that had been drawn into the orbit of the planet. From a gap in the side of the destroyer flew a much smaller craft, departing its mothership.

This Osprey dropship descended quickly through X-912's atmosphere, heating up as it passed through the planet's sparse atmosphere. It soon approached the grey, dry surface of X-912, rendered lifelessly rocky by turbulent volcanic activity in countless ages past. Skimming over stalagmite forests containing formations over two hundred feet tall, the Osprey made its way to the nearby research facility.

After an exchange of codes and handshake protocols between the Osprey's computer and the facility AI, the dropship made its way through a hole in the energy shielding protecting the base, having been cleared for landing.

Tracker Team and their two charges emerged through the dropship's lowered bay-door, with the two unarmored individuals covering their mouths to protect themselves from the residual dust that had been kicked up by the Osprey's engines when it had landed. Looking around, Alan saw nothing especially interesting, or more importantly, threatening. While his training had taught him to anticipate danger from the most unexpected sources, he could detect no hostility in his surroundings. Tracker Team kept their weapon muzzles down.

A blast-door slid slowly and neatly open at the end of the landing pad, revealing two figures. One was a middle-aged man in standard ONI uniform and no indication of rank, while the other was a glowing life-sized hologram of a majestic deer, tinted slightly green. \_An AI\_, Alan identified.

Stepping forward, the man extended a hand to Scaldman and Embers in turn, shaking their hands.

"My name is Operative Calson," he introduced, "And this is Dryad, our resident AI. Welcome to Fletcher Base, home of Project Beyond-The-Veil."

### 3. Chapter Two - Beyond the Veil

**\*\*Chapter Two â€" Beyond The Veil\*\***

**\*\*1725 Hours, November 2, 2642 (Unified Earth Calendar)\*\***

\*\*ONI Fletcher Research Facility, X-912, (CLASSIFIED LOCATION)\*\*

"Project BEYOND THE VEIL was initiated four years ago."

The thing that Alan decided that he liked least about the operative known as Calson was the fact that he never showed any emotion. The operative would speak, his mouth would twist to form words, but as far as Alan had noticed, the man had not smiled, frowned, or made any expression in the fifteen minutes that they had spent in Fletcher Base.

The facility's visitors sat in a circular room that served as Fletcher Facility's meeting-slash-briefing area, with the exception of Michael, who preferred to stand. A round table, made of some smooth white material that Alan was privately convinced was marble, took center place in the room, conference chairs placed around it. Within the table was set a holo-projector, allowing for presentations to be shown.

"The UNSC Where No Man Has Gone, an exploratory vessel, picked up an unknown transmission within Slipspace on the twenty-second of May, two-six three-eight. This transmission was found to be looped, and a sample was recorded and relayed to an UNSC base once the exploratory vessel's mission had ended. Upon analysis, the signal was found to contain large amounts of garbled data, much of which was ultimately unrecognizable. However, Forerunner patterns were salvaged from within the transmission data. At this point, ONI Section Three took interest, and took charge of the project. After the partial Forerunner origin of the transmission was confirmed, the Prowler Haiku was sent to trace and locate the source of the signal, in hopes of discovering a previously unknown Forerunner installation."

Calson waved a hand as he spoke, dimming the lights. The holo-projector hummed into life, showing a recording of the original mission from the viewpoint of a camera mounted above the stealth vessel's bridge. The image showed the Prowler approaching and initiating orbit around X-912.

"The Haiku was able to trace the signal to this planet, which was then designated as Ex-Nine-One-Two. A team of operatives landed planetside, at the source of the signal."

The recording shifted to a helmet mission-recording, showing a team of armored ONI operatives trudging through an unlit cave, illumination being provided by flashlights mounted on weapons and helmets. The operatives moved silently and cautiously, weapons raised and ready to fire.

Within the recording, the team of operatives suddenly stopped at the raised hand of the point man. After a moment, the man signaled for the team to continue, and a whispered voice spoke.

"\_Forerunner facility confirmed.\_"

The team moved around a bend, and the recording suddenly cut off.

"At the point, all powered equipment were disabled by a permanent energy field that we are as of yet unable to negate. No further recordings were able to be made of the rest of the mission, but the ground team eventually returned safely to the Haiku and reported their findings. The presence of Forerunner architecture was confirmed, but there wasâ€¦ more. The caverns discovered were extensive, and had a layered structure."

A three-dimensional map of the caverns appeared on the hologram, showing a series of flattened cave structures. Alan was reminded of the stacked structure of sandwiches.

"The topmost seven layers contained Forerunner architecture and artifacts. While this by itself was an immense find, it was the three additional layers beneath the Forerunner section of the caverns that had captured the team's interest. The shape and design of the structures located in the bottom layers indicated non-Forerunner origins. Indeed, after further examination, we have determined that these artifacts are in fact millions of years older than the Forerunner structures found above them. As far as humankind is aware, there is only one known race to have existed before the Forerunners â€" the Precursors."

Scaldman shifted, expression rapt, obviously fascinated by the information being relayed by the operative's presentation. The hologram showed a number of documents, that as far as Alan could tell, displayed result data from the investigation.

"On the bottommost tenth layer, the team discovered a large cuboid structure, of sufficient size to drive a vehicle into. The operatives did not touch the artifact, but reported that the cuboid was open on one side. Inside the cuboid was nothing â€" complete darkness. After further examination and experimentation, our research has determined that this is due to an effect which we have dubbed a "true vacuum". The field generated within the cuboid sucks everything in, whether it is solid matter, plasma, or even light."

"This phenomenon has been dubbed Anomaly E01, as we are at a loss to explain the presence of the true vacuum. In response to the presence of suspected Precursor technology and the Anomaly, ONI Section Three set up the Fletcher Research Facility and initiated Project BEYOND THE VEIL in order to research and attempt to recover the technology that is contained within the caverns, with a priority on understanding Anomaly E01. We are technically standing above the ruins right at this very moment."

Alan could not help but glance down for a brief moment, as if expecting to see through the walls of the facility and perceive the secrets of those who had come before.

"Six months ago, we conducted an experiment with an unmanned probe. We programmed a probe unit to enter into the anomaly, scan its surroundings, and return. We never saw it again. Undaunted, our research teams theorized that the electronic mechanisms may have been damaged by the true vacuum, much as the equipment of Haiku's ground team had been, and created a simple probe, meant to travel back and forth for a length of ten meters without complex electronic components. Two days after the failure of the first probe, the second probe was released. This time, the probe was recovered undamaged."

Blueprints of the first and second probes used rotated slowly as the holo-projector displayed the images.

"One month ago, Battle Group 18 left the military installation at Asgard colony. After a successful transition to Slipspace, they were never heard from again. An ONI team was sent to investigate, and found similar leftover energies as had been displayed by Anomaly E01. The team also experienced the presence of a true-vacuum for less than three hours before the phenomenon ended, dubbed Anomaly E02. Current theories suggest that Battle Group 18 had fallen through the true-vacuum. This brings us to the present. After hearing of the investigation, Director Han has decided to greenlight phase four of Project BEYOND THE VEIL â€" sending a human team through the true vacuum. This is where you come in."

If Venator operatives had been trained less rigidly, Tracker Team might have shifted uneasily. As it were, they showed no outward reaction. Alan frowned inside his own helmet, instinctively knowing that his teammates had tensed imperceptibly. This was hardly a standard mission â€" it might be suicide to step into an unknown and unexplained scientific phenomenon. Nonetheless, they would do their duty and accomplish the mission to the best of their ability.

"Permission to speak, sir?" Dane raised his hand.

"Granted."

"If you suspect that this vacuum disables powered equipment, how will our gear function? Sir."

"Good question," Calson paused for a moment, "However, our team believes that we have solved this particular problem. I assume that most of your team are unacquainted with the concept of neural physics?"

"You are correct, sir."

"A short summary is that the Precursors believed that the entire universe was a living thing, but so in a manner that ordinary biological organisms cannot comprehend. Sentient beings have minds and souls, you see, but we merely cannot see this. The universe, however, can, and matter reacts to the presence of a living and thinking mind. Their technology was based off this concept, and our team has reason to believe that the true-vacuum field would recognize the presence of sentient beings. The field of unknown energy that shorts out electrical equipment is generated by the true-vacuum, and reacts strongly to the presence of sentient beings â€" this is the only reason we have been able to conduct experimentation and such. This field is weaker in the upper levels, and reacts less strongly to the presence of sentient beings there, which was why the equipment of the \_Haiku\_'s ground team were disabled. We have been attempting to discover how far the protective field generated by sentience extends, but fluctuations have frustrated our attempts so far. Even so, we are strongly positive that your equipment would be able to survive a transition if you were to accompany it. Electro-magnetic hardening has been found to be sufficient in order to help equipment survive past the first two levels where the field's reaction is too weak to protect powered equipment, which means that your MJOLNIR systems

should be sufficient to ward off the effect. Any further questions?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Now, you'll be taking Atlas here with you."

An image of a bald man dressed in a business suit that looked like it had been plucked out of a mid-twentieth century movie appeared on the holo-projector, bowing.

"I'm Atlas, and I aim to see this expedition go as smoothly as possible," the AI said with an Irish accent, "Good to meet you."

Calson nodded to the AI's holographic representation, and turned back to the team, "Atlas will help with analysis, recording, anything that'll be needed on the mission. Atlas, if you're ready?"

At a nod from the AI, Calson pulled a data wafer out of the holo-projector, terminating the hologram. The lights slowly powered on.

"If you'll just follow me, we'll be going down to Level Ten."

\*\*1200 Hours, November 1, 2642 (Unified Earth Calendar)\*\*

\*\*Sangheili Fleet of Disillusioned Retribution, Orbit over Tennorak\*\*

"Warriors, answer me this! Why do we battle against the False Prophets?"

"They have no honor!" the squad of Sangheili warriors roared over the noise of the Phantom's engines, dimmed emergency lights glinting off their purple Special-Operations armor.

"Why do they have no honor? What did they do to the sons of Sanghelios?"

"They deceived us into enslavement with promises of salvation, betrayed our people, and slaughtered unblooded innocents alongside defending warriors!" the armored Sangheili growled angrily after his proclamation.

"Tell me, proud Sangheili, what do we do to those who have done us immeasurable wrong? Those whose crimes go unpunished, the blood of millions upon their hands? Do we stand aside and allow dishonorable cowards to escape their just due?"

"NO! THEY SHALL PAY!" the hold of the Phantom rang with the fierce battle-cries of Sanghelios' elite warriors.

"That they shall, my warriors. They will pay with their blood and souls! Prepare your weapons, for they are the instruments of our wrath, come to seek vengeance!"

Kvas 'Tevanai, Special Operations Commander of the Forty-Second Special Operations Cohort, felt his hearts swell with pride and joy

as he looked upon his warriors preparing for combat. All of the warriors under his command were experienced veterans of many engagements, and it showed. All around him, Sangheili warriors checked their weapons with economic, expert movements for the final time before battle was joined.

Looking down, Kvas made sure his own weapons were secure. His trusty plasma rifle, while pitted and scorched from a hundred battles, had seen him alive through each and every engagement. The elegant handle of his energy blade hung at his side, ready to be drawn forth and drink deep in the blood of Kvas' enemies. He thumbed the intricate patterns that he had personally inscribed into the handle, a miniaturized version of his personal ongoing Battle-Poem. Kvas was of the opinion that a true swordsman should be able to craft his own weapon, and added to the carvings diligently whenever he had time.

Standing near nine feet tall, Kvas 'Tevanai was a formidable and imposing warrior. Clad in the black-and-white of a Sangheili Special Operations officer, he was agile and strong, perfect qualities for a swordsman. His noted skill in the usage of the energy sword had caused the additional suffix of 'ai" to be added to his name, marking him as an exceptional blademaster.

"Warriors! We are approaching the landing zone. Prepare for battle!" the voice of the pilot warned over the shipboard speakers.

Kvas grinned, his four mandibles curling. He knew that the deeds of the Forty-Second Cohort would do him proud today.

The Special Operations warriors boiled through the side doors as soon as the bay doors were opened, screaming battle cries as they surged forward to meet the enemy. Kvas was the first out, landing steadily upon the dusty surface of Tennorak, home to a stronghold of Covenant Loyalists.

Igniting his energy blade with the hiss of plasma searing the air, Kvas roared, sprinting gracefully towards the enemy lines a hundred meters away, and the great fortress that lay behind them. Streaks of plasma fire burned through the air as his warriors engaged, supported by the weapons of the four Phantoms that had transported the cohort. Special Operations Sangheili took cover, exchanging fire with Loyalist Jiralhanae and Yig-Yar, cutting the enemy down without mercy. Two teams of warriors set up turret emplacements in the partial shelter of the rocky formations that covered the surface of Tennorak, loosing powerful bursts of destructive energy at the Loyalist squads.

Kvas ignored all this as he danced and swerved, dodging the projectiles and plasma fire that the enemy sent his way. A century of battle had taught him the rhythm of combat, the art of death. As he closed the distance between himself and the enemy, the volume of fire aimed for him intensified, Loyalist soldiers noticing the threat, forcing him to roll.

Rushing towards the nearest enemy soldier, a Jiralhanae Minor, Kvas raised his blade even as he continued to rain plasma upon the warrior, depleting his shields. The Jiralhanae, seeing that no amount of ranged fire had been able to kill the advancing Sangheili madman, prepared the wicked bayonet affixed to his weapon, and snarled in

defiance.

Meeting his opponent's challenge, Kvas leapt forward, covering the last few meters into the enemy's lines, and swept with his sword, bisecting the Minor's weapon. Another slash cut deep into the Jiralhanae's chest, dropping the warrior.

Kvas turned to the rest of the pack, all of whom howled in anger at the death of their comrade, rushing forward in an effort to overwhelm the Sangheili swordsman. However, Kvas was a master of the blade, whose skill in the art was rarely matched, and none of the Jiralhanae had ever faced an opponent of his caliber. The Sangheili twirled and spiraled, cutting down enemies and splitting open energy shields. Heads, limbs, and dead bodies followed in his wake. None could stop him.

Kvas smiled grimly, taking pleasure in the joy of battle, even as he cleaved apart the helm of a Jiralhanae Major, slaying the soldier. Behind him, he could hear the cries of his Special Operations warriors as they charged the now disorganized Loyalist lines, shattering the formation into a thousand pieces. Victory was at hand.

"Sangheili fool!"

Kvas spun at the insult, using the movement to behead a thin Yig-Yar soldier. In the maelstrom of battle, he had noticed little but his next target and possible threats to his safety. Sensing that the Loyalists around him had either backed away to engage easier targets or lay dead at his feet, he stared at the challenger.

A great Chieftain of the Jiralhanae, nearly half a foot taller than Kvas, stood resplendent in black-and-red armor, the sun gleaming off his crested helm. His thickly muscled arms supported the weight of a massive gravity-hammer.

"Brute," Kvas stated, causing his opponent to snarl. Jiralhanae detested the semi-derogatory term that humans had known them by during the Great War.

"Weak, misguided fool," the Chieftain spat, "You and your kind will not prevail against the Chosen Ones of the gods."

Gesturing at the bodies of the Loyalists around him, Kvas replied, "I have prevailed against your warriors today, and I see nothing before my eyes that would stop me."

The Chieftain grinned, obviously missing the veiled insult, "I will kill you. I am the Fist of Doom, Chosen of the Prophets and the Gods."

"Your Prophets spout only lies," Kvas countered, "The Prophet of Transcendence has run from world to world, but he shall not escape today. Even now, our fleets demolish your ships in high orbit."

"Ha!" the Chieftain barked in laughter, "Transcendence? Nay, He is no longer Transcendence. He is the Prophet of Doom, bringer of the Great Journey! I am his hammer, his fist, and I shall smite thee, fool!"

With that, the Jiralhanae swung his heavy weapon. Kvas hastily jumped aside, avoiding the powerful gravity field emitted by the head of the hammer, knowing that a single strike could break bones and cripple him. Twirling his blade, he jabbed at the Chieftain's chest, only to have his stroke turned aside in a crackle of opposing energies by his opponent's boosted shielding. The Chieftain swung again, shattering the earth where Kvas had stood as he danced aside.

The Chieftain had the advantage of reach and strength, but Kvas knew that he was swifter and more precise. Each warrior embodied the strengths of their chosen weapons; the Chieftain slow but powerful, Kvas fast and light, but none the less deadly for it. The two dueled across the plains of Tennorak, raining blows at each other, Kvas dodging the swings of the hammer while the Jiralhanae let his shields absorb the attacks of the energy blade.

Dimly, Kvas was aware that the battle around them had stopped. Cries of encouragement came from his warriors all around, and he knew that his cohort had triumphed over the Loyalist force.

Suddenly, the Chieftain thrust his hammer's head straight at Kvas. Awkwardly dodging the unexpected move, Kvas stumbled slightly. Taking advantage of his opponent's momentary weakness, the Jiralhanae reached in a pouch and pulled out a grenade, studded with spikes. Kvas's eyes widened in alarm.

The Chieftain lobbed the grenade at Kvas, almost lazily. Kvas scrambled aside, recovering from the stumble, and was thrown on his back by the grenade's explosion.

Dazed, Kvas was stunned for a crucial moment. His shields had borne the brunt of the explosive force, but had sputtered out. Before he could recover, the Chieftain lumbered through the cloud of dust kicked up by the grenade and placed his hammer upon Kvas' chestplate, pinning him in place with the hammer's powerful gravity field and his own immense strength.

"The gods favor not those who turn their backs on them, fool. Would you beg for mercy?"

"No," Kvas grimaced, "But I do have one final thing to say to you."

"Oh?"

"Gloating over a defeated opponent is one of the greatest mistakes a warrior could make."

As he spoke, Kvas swept his sword up, cutting through the long handle of the hammer. Deprived of its power, the gravity field flickered for a moment, then died. The Chieftain roared in pain, as two of his fingers had been cut off, his armor's shields having been configured to ignore his hands to allow for better grip.

Rolling, Kvas jumped to his feet, and leapt at his enemy. Weaponless, the Chieftain could not counter the powerful thrust of the energy blade. His already weakened shields held for a long moment, then died, allowing the sword to cut through a raised arm and plunge deep into the warrior's thick chest.



The Jiralhanae grunted, eyes wide with surprise at the unexpected reversal of fortune. Not allowing the Chieftain any reprieve, Kvas twirled his sword up, and neatly cut into his opponent's neck, letting out a steady stream of blood. Backing away, Kvas watched as the Chieftain slowly toppled like a fallen mountain.

Standing over the fallen warrior, Kvas heard the Chieftain's last words.

"In deathâ€¦ I findâ€¦ salvation."

And the enemy was dead.

Turning to the cheers of his warriors, Kvas waved a team of demolition experts forward towards the enemy fortress. The soldiers began to place charges around the great obsidian gates of the Loyalist stronghold.

As he waited for the warriors to finish their work, he counted the numbers of his cohort. Fourteen of his warriors had fallen today. Lowering his head in momentary sorrow and remembrance, Kvas swore to personally inform the families of the fallen warriors' deeds, so that their exploits could be carved into the Battle Poems of their clans and join the tales of their ancestors in glory.

Hearing a shrill whistling that was familiar to him, Kvas looked up as a lone Sangheili drop-pod smashed into the ground fifty meters away. Frowning, Kvas felt certain he knew which foolhardy individual was behind the stunt.

A warrior in the blue of a Sangheili Minor strode forth from the drop-pod, energy sword in hand. While it was exceedingly rare for such an honored weapon to be wielded by a lowly Minor, the warrior held it steadily and skillfully.

"Commander 'Tevanai! Have I missed the battle?" the Minor strode confidently forward, greeting Kvas.

"Mostly, 'Vadam," Kvas replied evenly.

"I could have heard the disapproving tone in your voice from orbit," Laros 'Vadam grinned in amusement, "You should learn to lighten up."

"Do not think that being the son of the Arbiter automatically gains you respect, 'Vadam. You must learn to obey orders. The Fleetmaster will not be happy with you, and doubly so for your father."

"I felt my extensive skills would be of better use down here rather than up in orbit, where there are no enemies to slay with my blade. I had hoped to join you in your battle."

"The bulk of the enemy lies dead, and only the apprehension of the False Prophet remains," Kvas pondered for a moment, then decided, "Fine. You may join my cohort in our search for the Liar. On the conditions that you will obey my orders fully, and that you are not to wander off in search of foolish glory."

Laros smiled, saluting with his blade, "You have my word."

Kvas grunted, privately doubting that the young Minor would truly obey."

A bright flare of plasma signaled the detonation of the charges, leaving behind a gaping hole in the gate of the fortress. Kvas stowed his blade and drew his rifle, leading his men into the depths of the ancient structure.

"Second and third squads are to secure the armory. Fourth through eighth are to take the enemy barracks. Ninth and ten, your objective is to clear and secure the fortress generators. First squad, follow me. We go to confront the False Prophet. 'Vadam, with us," Kvas ordered.

Acknowledging their leader, the warriors hurried off to their tasks. Kvas led his squad through the mazelike corridors of the stronghold, heading for the central lift which would take them to the topmost level of the fortress, where the Prophet was known to be residing in. Along the way, the Sangheili engaged multiple Loyalist ambushes and patrols, surprising them with the stealth capabilities of their armor. Kvas noted 'Vadam's skill as the younger warrior decapitated two Jiralhanae combatants with one single stroke. The youngster had obviously inherited his father's prodigious combat skills, but was yet to learn discipline.

Within ten units, the team had reached their first objective. With nimble fingers, Kvas activated the controls for the gravity lift, which pulled the Sangheili into the air, ascending quickly.

"Ready your weapons. The False Prophet will likely have guardians." Kvas warned his squad.

As the squad brought their weapons up, the lift deposited them into the center of a large, circular room, dark and dimly lit. The only light came from bluish monitors that lined the walls of the room. The rest of the room lay in heavy shadow, oppressive and stifling. The effect was rather unsettling. Kvas shifted his mandibles uneasily.

"Show yourself, False Prophet! We bring your end!" For all his faults, Kvas could not deny that young 'Vadam was courageous. A strange mood seemed to have fallen upon he and his warriors, but the Minor stood tall and brandished his sword, driving back the darkness with the light of the plasma blade.

A whisper, twisted and eerie, drifted into the ears of the unnerved Sangheili.

"My end, you say?"

At the far end of the chamber, a single greenish spot lit up, revealing the form of a wrinkled San 'Shyuum. The light played across the folds in his skin, deepening the shadows and emphasizing the forms of the decrepit creature. A worn headdress, color unknowable in the gloom, decorated the Prophet's head, inscribed with a single glowing symbol that Kvas did not recognize as any Forerunner script. The Prophet sat upon a throne of hewn stone, instead of the shielded gravity thrones that his kind usually favored.

"What would you know about my end?" the Prophet inquired softly.

Despite the quiet tone of the San 'Shyumm's voice, Kvas could hear every word clearly. Stepping forward, he aimed his rifle at the Prophet's head.

"We would know much, so-called Prophet," he declared, "We are here to apprehend you. Your lies stagnated the races of the former Covenant for millennia and ensnared them into servitude, and when it suited your kind, you turned your back on Sanghelios and attempted to wipe our people out. But your time has ended and we have triumphed. Your Great Journey is a lie; the Halos bring only death."

The Prophet chuckled, throwing Kvas off, but it was his words that truly startled him.

"I know."

The San 'Shyumm paused for a moment, peering at Kvas.

"My words startle you. Nonetheless, I am well aware that the Halos are deathbringers. They were made by the gods themselves in order to grant their users their final and greatest blessing. I have seen the truth, that which even the old Prophets did not. The Great Journey is no lie—in truth, the Great Journey is death itself. I am no longer the Prophet of Transcendence, for I have seen the Truth. I am the Prophet of Doom."

The San 'Shyumm leaned forward, a maniacal gleam in his previously dull eyes.

"You are ignorant. Blind. You do not understand, you do not see, no more than the foolish humans do. The Mantle of the gods may be their inheritance, but it is outdated, for the Elder Ones are returning, brought along by their meddling. The only escape is the Great Journey. I have sat long here among the artifacts of dead gods, and I have seen much that you will never know. A pity."

With a grand wave, the Prophet activated a dozen lights, illuminating the piles of Forerunner artifacts that lay haphazardly around the room, covered with a thick, dark substance. Upon closer inspection, Kvas realized that the Forerunner technology was slathered with blood. He shuddered in repulsion.

Giggling insanely, giddy with revelations that only he could fathom, the Prophet continued, "The only escape is death, do you not know? For thousands upon thousands of years, the Covenant believed that those who followed the ideologies of the gods would reach the Great Journey when they died. They were partially correct. Death was the final gift of the gods, not the beginning."

The San 'Shyumm smiled benevolently upon the Sangheili, and Kvas decided that he would much rather have the Prophet screaming in rage than looking at him like an uncle looking upon a favored nephew.

"You are mad, Prophet," Laros growled, "Your lies have only grown more preposterous in insanity."

The Prophet sighed, "No, you do not see. You will never understand. Only I know the will of the gods. The Elder Ones cannot be denied but for the Great Journey, and they will soon return, brought about by the ignorant actions of the foolish humans. The veil shall be breached, and the darkness beyond will surge forward to retake what was once theirs. In my mercy, I shall grant you the release that you yearn for."

Kvas started in comprehension. Firing quickly, he hit the Prophet with a hail of plasma, scorching the San 'Shyumm's withered body. But he was too late, for the Prophet had already pressed a symbol upon his throne.

"Destruction sequence activated. All Covenant personnel must evacuate the base," A deep voice intoned, echoing through the entire installation. The Prophet let out a final cackle before falling forward, dead.

"Run," Kvas roared, "Go!"

As if released from a trance, the team rushed back to the gravity lift. Laros thumbed the controls, and the warriors began to descend.

"All warriors of the Forty-Second Special Operations Cohort, hear me!" Kvas barked into his helmet communicator, "Evacuate the fortress! Drop all activities and retreat!"

Reaching ground floor, the team immediately retraced their steps, sprinting past the corpses of fallen enemies. Kvas ran for all he was worth, pumping his powerful muscles for as much speed as he was capable of. Meanwhile, the base speakers began a countdown, igniting a flame of panic in the minds of all those who heard it.

All of a sudden, Kvas was free. Emerging into the sunlight, he saw that almost all of his warriors had already escaped the doomed fortress. Behind him came another squad, the last of the stragglers. Motioning with his arms, he signaled for the entire cohort to retreat away from the fortress as far as possible. Mentally counting down, Kvas ran with the rest of his warriors, then signaled once he judged that they had put enough distance between the fortress and themselves for safety.

Hunkering down behind a boulder, he counted to himself, "â€| Four, three, two, one."

An immense wave of air blew past him and the warriors, accompanied by a great roar of high explosives. Behind the wind came a rain of shrapnel, ping-pong off the shields of the warriors.

After a while, Kvas came out from behind the rocks, and looked at the fortress, or rather, where the fortress had been. The structure had fallen in upon itself, after a huge explosion had torn apart the top half of the stronghold. Eyes wide, he surveyed the destruction. It was plain that nothing could have possibly survived the explosion.

At this point, Kvas became aware of a voice in his ear.

"Tevanai, do you hear me? This is Fleetmaster Kaso. Our ships have

picked up a large explosion at the point of the objective, what is the status of your warriors?"

Still staring at the wreckage of the fortress, Kvas replied, "This is Commander 'Tevanai of the Forty-Second Special Operations Cohort. The objective has been destroyed, and my warriors are intact. We request transportation for immediate extraction."

"We hear you, Commander."

One hundred and fifty-two units later, long after the surviving Sangheili had departed along with the bodies of their fallen comrades, and the fleet had transitioned into Slipspace in order to return to Sanghelios and spread word of their success, something stirred beneath the wreckage of the fallen fortress. The explosion had awoken it, and it was hungry. Spreading its senses upward, it began to dig for the surface.

#### 4. Chapter Three- Through the Looking-Glass

**\*\*Chapter Three â€" Through The Looking Glass\*\***

**\*\*1740 Hours, November 2, 2642 (Unified Earth Calendar)\*\***

**\*\*ONI Fletcher Research Facility, X-912, (CLASSIFIED LOCATION)\*\***

"Would you kindly allow me to access your inter-team communication protocols? I could relay relevant tactical information, and my sensors possess a greater range than those of your suits."

Atlas accompanied the team by means of a black sphere, suspended by anti-gravity technology. It had been one of ONI's many innovations, allowing AIs to accompany ground forces without MJOLNIR armor and its capabilities, like a lesser version of a Forerunner Monitor. The black probe that currently played host to Atlas contained numerous upgrades, including electro-magnetic hardening and a weapon tube for limited fire support.

Dane nodded, and allowed Atlas into the secure channel that Tracker Team used for combat coordination.

The elevator that was transporting the team made no sound as it moved. If the blinking counter that displayed the current depth and level of the platform hadn't been there, Alan would hardly have known that he was moving. Having access to an unfeasibly high amount of funds was probably one of the perks of being a top-level secret ONI facility, Alan reflected.

The atmosphere around the team was charged with subtle excitement. Scaldman, the civilian scientist, mumbled under his breath as he rummaged through his pack, organizing and reorganizing his tools. Alan had noticed him scribbling feverishly in an archaic notebook as he worked, obviously passionate about his work.

Embers, on the other hand, remained coldly calm, as would have been expected of a veteran ONI operative. She had smiled slightly at Scaldman's antics, tight-lipped and brief, but otherwise her only reactions to the unfolding events were to load her sidearm and pick

up additional ammo. Alan suspected that she had already been to Fletcher Base before, and as such, the facility held no surprises for her.

Tracker Team displayed an air of professionalism and confidence, angling themselves around their unarmored charges subtly, ready to spring into action at any time. A good security detail would be always present, yet unseen, and other from SPARTANS, Venator operatives were the best of the best. Alan himself stood to the back of the group and slightly to the right, able to provide covering fire and tackle the VIPs if they froze in a firefight. Though one could never have known their thoughts from their stoic behavior, their inter-team chatter painted a different picture.

"In short, what we're doing here amounts to us entering an unknown area to do recon, facing an unknown amount of possible hostiles, whose theoretical capabilities are unknown, with no support other from one AI, an ONI spook, and one helpless civilian that we have to protect? Interesting mission, this."

"We'll be fine, Jin," Dane said in a slightly exasperated tone, "I'm sure ONI know more than they're letting on, as usual."

"Maybe," Jin snorted, "Doesn't mean that this mission is a completely unknown and we have next to no intel. They're pretty much throwing us out blindfolded with instructions saying "try to not get killed", no?"

"We can handle ourselves," Alan cut in, amused, "We've been in tougher situations before. Remember that time on Tantalus IV? Somehow, I doubt whatever we're going to go up against will be worse than ten thousand Brute berserkers charging us, screaming for blood."

"Yeah," Alan could hear Jin's reluctant smile over the chat, "But I'm a little doubtful we're going to have the advantage of orbital bombardment this time."

"We're here, people," Dane's voice had switched tone, less friendly and calmly professional, "Game faces on. Keep current escort positions, report any possible contacts."

The elevator doors slid smoothly open as the rest of Tracker Team flashed their confirmations through their helmets. Calson led the team out into the cavern, nodding to passing ONI personnel. The site was well lit with multiple floodlights and softer lamps were used for personal illumination, but the sharp contrast between the light and the shadows cast by equipment gave off a rather oppressive air, as if the shadows were pressing in on the lights, besieging them and waiting for them to fall before reclaiming their domain. Alan didn't like it — this was the sort of environment that encouraged ambushes, and would have made for an extremely difficult firefight against intelligent enemies.

Strange items and artifacts which Alan supposed was of Precursor origin lay stacked near the walls of the cavern. They were alien, even by Forerunner standards. Unlike the geometrically monolithic architecture of the Forerunners or the smooth organic curve of technology expected from Covenant heritage, Precursor work had a distinct style. Alan observed many cascading patterns and branching

spirals that seemed to be the rule among Precursor artifacts. Many items had a segmented look to them; Alan could see a team of ONI scientists examining a unknown device that vaguely reminded him of a human spinal cord with long spikes sticking out from either side.

Calson led the team wordlessly towards what seemed to roughly be the center of the cavern. From afar, Alan saw the structure that was the focus of their mission. A great cube sat in the cavern, away from the other Precursor artifacts, colored a mixture of creamy yellow and black. As they neared the structure, Alan's enhanced eyesight started picking out details on the surface of the cuboid. Swirling symbols and runes were etched into the walls, each wall containing many thousands of interconnecting characters. Strangely, they looked rough, as if they had been inscribed by hand, unlike Alan's previous experience with ancient alien technology. None of the symbols were familiar to Alan, and some of them hurt his head if he focused on them. For his own peace of mind, Alan wrenched his attention away from the alien script, slightly alarmed at how he could not remember any of the runes once he had diverted his focus elsewhere.

Instead, he examined the Anomaly. Calson's earlier description had been apt â€" there was simply nothing, in place of one of the Cube's sides. Staring into it, Alan could not shake away a feeling of mingled awe and discomfort. His mind struggled to understand that what he was seeing was an absolute lack of \_everything\_, even emptier than the void of space.

A gaggle of researchers and ONI operatives stood around the Cube, some taking notes while others watched the insertion team approach with measuring gazes and calculating looks, as if debating their chances of survival. Alan did not like Intelligence spooks, even though he worked for them.

Arriving in front of the Cube, Tracker Team did one last check on their weapons as a pair of ONI operatives approached Embers and conversed with her quietly, silently enough that not even the Venators' augmented hearing could pick up their words. Alan loaded his weapons, and ran a quick diagnosis on his armor systems. Satisfied, he waited for the go-ahead from Embers.

Nodding quickly at the words of the other ONI personnel, the operative waved at Dane, signaling him to proceed. Dane pointed to Jin, himself, and the Anomaly, indicating that they two would go in first as an advance guard to confirm whether it was possible for humans to enter the field safely. Confirmation lights flashed, the Venators staying silent.

Cautiously, the two armored soldiers approached the field of darkness, their feet moving firmly but silently. They reacted to the unknown situation as they would to a combat scenario, their weapons drawn and ready to fire. As the two advanced, their weapons touched the void nearly simultaneously.

Before Alan could blink, they were gone. No sign was left of his teammates â€" as soon as their weapons had encountered the vacuum, they had vanished without a trace. Scaldman drew in a deep breath, eyes wide, while the two remaining Venators stood stock-still, silently hoping for the best. Embers narrowed her eyes, and Calson had no reaction at all.

The seconds that trickled by were thick with tension, like drops of some syrup slowly trickling down a wall. No one spoke or made any sound, waiting to see if the experiment would succeed. Alan had often heard the saying "the seconds felt like years", but never before had it felt so true. While he undoubtedly experienced time normally, his mind felt sluggish, heavy with anticipation.

And all of a sudden, the tension was broken as Jin appeared out of thin air, seemingly intact. She staggered, then straightened up.

"The way is clear," she said through her helmet speakers, voice a little shaky.

ONI scientists looked triumphant and congratulated each other, a few even going as far as to shake hands, while the operatives looked as impassive as ever, though Alan noticed that Embers had broken into a slight smile. Michael said nothing, but Alan knew he was privately relieved. Working with the rest of the team had made them rather attached to each other.

"The process is rather uncomfortable," Jin informed the team as the researchers took notes, "I'm not sure how to describe it, but I don't like it."

Calson nodded, and turned to Embers, "Phase four is a go."

"Sir," Embers acknowledged, then waved the rest of the team forward.

Alan approached the Anomaly, and touched the tip of his rifle to the field. What happened next was hard to explain, but he was suddenly surrounded by complete darkness, yet it was light. His mind flashed, shocking him. One moment he was clad in armor, and the other, he was naked. His eyes were closed, but he had no memory of closing them. He felt as he were falling and spinning at the same time.

And suddenly, he was whole again. His head ached and he felt as if an icy cyclone was raging within his head, but he could feel the ground beneath his two feet and his augmented body was fighting to restore him to full combat capacity, nanites in his bloodstream working to counter the effect of extreme disorientation.

After a second or two, he unclenched his fists, glad that Venator weapons were reinforced, as otherwise he would have left dents in the smooth metal. Headache receding, he quickly assessed the situation.

The team had appeared in a large cavern not unlike the one that they had just left, but there were no artifacts in evidence. A strange ambient light bathed the entire scene in a dim green. Behind him was an exact duplicate of the Cube; he suspected that even the hand-carved symbols were the same. Tracker Team was alert, four green lights indicating a ready status. Dane stood ready with his rifle, standing watch over the disoriented team. Atlas' probe floated amidst them, apparently undamaged. The two unaugmented members of the expedition, however, were worse off.

Scaldman groaned as he knelt on the floor, one hand lightly kneading



his forehead. His eyes were closed, but he kept a neutral expression, obviously fighting off the pain. Humans in the twenty-seventh century all received light augmentations on birth, heightening reaction-times, strength, and enhancing the human body's natural healing abilities, but these upgrades could only go so far. Alan could only imagine what agony their more vulnerable charges were going through.

Surprisingly, Scaldman recovered first, shaking his head slowly. He slowly stood up and brushed himself off, frowning slightly. Patting his pack, he pulled out his notebook and scribbled.

Embers was prone on the floor, curled in a fetal position. It seemed that the transition had affected her more than it had the others, as her pale face attested to. Her face was screwed together in a grimace.

When she finally managed to recover, the operative looked up with surprise as Scaldman extended a hand to her. Taking it, she stood unsteadily.

"Thank you," she whispered, to which the doctor replied with a nod and a warm smile.

Being an ONI operative was hardly a life where one received much help from others, even allies.

"Sir," Dane broadcast over his speakers, "What is your status?"

"I'm fine, operative," Embers confirmed, "Mission is still go. Atlas, please conduct a scan and see if you can tell us more about where we are."

"Already on it," the AI said. Machinery hummed softly as sensors came to life and began to gather information.

While the sensors worked, Alan noticed the fallen hull of an information probe. It was almost certain that it had been the one used in the previous experiment Calson had mentioned. The probe looked damaged from the fall it had sustained when its power had failed, and lay a little away from the Cube, but it was untouched. Hopefully, that meant that this unknown environment was uninhabited.

"We are currently two hundred, sixty-seven point nine-six meters underground," Atlas spoke up, having concluded his scans, "Sonic indicates an extensive series of catacombs through that tunnel, beyond which is a slope which will lead us to the surface. I would recommend recon and exploration of the area â€" my sensors are not picking up any possible hostiles."

"Team, move out," Embers ordered, "Atlas, have you found anything that might seem like a control center or some important installation, of any kind?"

"Possibly. There is a central chamber within the catacombs which my sensors failed to penetrate. Other such areas exist, but are peripheral and smaller in scale, indicating lesser importance."

A navigation point appeared on the Venator team's HUDs, the eyepieces

that the two unarmored team members were mimicking them. The six moved out, accompanied by the bobbing sphere of Atlas's probe, heading for the only tunnel that led out of the cave containing the Cube.

Tracker Team immediately took their positions as escorts again, one Venator to each direction. Jin, as the squad's close combat specialist and demolitions specialist, took point, while Dane and Alan took right and left, respectively. Michael brought up the rear with his sniper rifle ready.

The team proceeded through the dimly-lit hole, emerging into an obviously artificial segment of the cave. Unlike the Precursor constructs from before, the architecture was a mix of Forerunner and an unknown alien technology. The base architecture seemed to utilize relatively familiar Forerunner shapes, but here and there were strangely organic forms, bulbous pods and carapace-like creations clinging onto the Forerunner artifacts like a parasite. Alan was vaguely reminded of a beehive. The brown of the alien technology merged or clashed with Forerunner grey. The lighting was even dimmer here, and illumination was sparse. Many corridors in the ancient installation were dark, the alien workings obviously having failed in ages past.

While there were no obvious threats, Alan felt a tingle down the back of his neck. He was instinctively aware of how the shadows seemed to move, though his sensors told him there was nothing there. The primal part of his human mind spoke to him, telling him that there was something lurking out of sight, but while his systems told a different story, he'd been trained to trust his instincts. Technology, however advanced, could always fail. Alan gripped his rifle tightly, flashing his muzzle-mounted light into the shadows, determined to flush out the source of his anxiety.

Atlas guided the way for the others, monitoring information from his sensors and feeding relevant data to the team. Without the AI, Alan doubted that they would have found their way through the winding maze-like catacombs. There were no identifying features on the walls, and the doors that they had passed so far were all sealed. The team stayed silent, subconsciously unwilling to disturb the stifling silence, lest they disturb the dead air that seemed to hang lifelessly in the musty corridors.

Eventually, Atlas stopped before a set of doors that were larger than the others that they had passed, previously. It stood as high as the walls of the passage it stood in, approximately three meters high and four wide. The AI began to interface with a digital lock that had suddenly popped up in the middle of the slit that indicated the center of the door, inserting digital lines of code in an attempt to access the door's security systems.

The team took positions around the working AI. Scaldman stood beside the probe and examined the surrounding architecture with an expression of interest, notebook once again in hand. Tracker Team stood two per side, weapons raised. Embers had drawn her pistol and was holding it steadily. Apparently, not even ONI spooks were immune to the slight claustrophobia the alien surroundings had induced upon the team.

The light that seemed to permeate random areas of the catacombs was

present in the strip where the team stood, but petered out before it could reach the end of either side of the corridor. This made for a slightly unsettling effect as the team stared into the shadows, cold beads of sweat forming unnoticed on the back of their necks.

"Impressive. This system is extremely complex," Atlas said, his Irish voice falling heavily into the air, "It will take me a few more minutes to crack the code."

The sudden sound of the AI's speech did not travel far, but sounded startlingly loud in the silence.

"He shouldn't have said anything," Jin whispered over the com, voice slightly hoarse.

"Quiet, Tracker Two," Dane admonished quietly, "Use this channel only for tactical reports."

The team was silent for several nerve-racking minutes, as their skin began to crawl and their unease continued to grow. The corridor was too wide for their flashlights to fully illuminate, leaving patches of dark however they angled themselves. Scaldman began to look slightly nervous, anxiety overcoming his professional interest.

"Does anyone else hear that noise?" the doctor asked in a carrying whisper.

Alan immediately refocused himself, paying attention to his auditory senses. He noticed a strange buzzing noise, faint but growing. It was just present, resonating both within his hearing and his mind.

"Contact," Michael suddenly spoke for the first time since they had deployed, his voice cold and collected.

The sniper fired, finger tightening around the trigger of his sniper rifle. The weapon hummed and there was a hiss of vaporizing flesh from within the darkness.

For a moment, everything was still.

Then, as some might say, all hell broke loose.

A screech of pain laced with alien anger came from within the shadows, just as Alan adjusted his aim and fired a burst of charged hard-light at whatever target Michael had spotted. A series of unearthly wails rent the air, causing both Dane and Jin to call out their engagement with the unknown contacts. The muted roar of automatic fire filled the previously silent air, sending charged bolts of hard-light slicing through the dark corridors. Michael fired his sniper rifle into the dark with uncanny accuracy, each invisible shot from his L-12 Farcaster laser sniper-rifle reporting success with flashes of incinerated organic matter.

"Not picking up any possible hostiles, my ass," Jin muttered over the team channel, "Anybody else notice that these bastards aren't showing up on our motion detectors?"

As he fired, Alan was strangely calm. This was what he knew best, pulling on a trigger and engaging enemies in combat with a reliable comrade by his side. Subconsciously, he noted the strange appearance of their attackers.

The hostiles were undoubtedly alien. They were insectoid, seeming to be bipedal anthropods. Most were humanoid, possessing humanlike dimensions along with two pairs of limbs. Two pairs of blue eyes lay underneath the ridge of their extended, domed heads, and their bodies were covered with a protective exoskeleton. Incoherent screeches issued from their mouths, shrill and devoid of any intelligence. Long metallic-looking tubes bulged and snaked through their shells, like cybernetic implants gone horribly wrong. They charged at the ONI team, brandishing wicked-looking claws and flailing tentacles, gurgling and howling.

Tracker Team spat fire back at them, casting the monstrous aliens down and burning through their ranks with cleansing light. A fresh sort of illumination lit the corridor as lines of hard-light rounds cut through the musty air, reminiscent of tracer ammunition, burning flesh and punching through the carapaces of the attackers. Michael stowed his Farcaster aside after his first clip of ammunition was exhausted, and opened fire with his custom sidearm, a powerful submachine-gun that sent superheated bullets sizzling through the thick shells of the aliens as Michael downed the hostiles one by one with well-placed headshots.

"Atlas, you had better get that door open fast!" Embers screamed over the noise of firing weapons and screeching aliens even as she pumped shots into approaching hostiles, "We're going to run out of ammo sooner or later!"

"One more minute, just one more minute," the AI muttered, sounding harried, "How did I not see this coming? I'm supposed to be an intelligence, for Mathematics' sake."

As Alan cut down a couple of the monsters rushing him, he saw a large figure loom up behind the fallen aliens. It was a hideously distorted combination of three separate individual aliens, merged horrifically into one great abomination that stood nearly as high as the ceiling. All three heads swerved together and stared straight at him, twelve blue eyes seeming to glow as it started barging towards him.

Alan fired a sustained burst from his rifle, but the rounds only chipped away at the monstrosity's overlapping carapace, melded together from the three original creatures' armor and infused with lines of what seemed to be glowing circuitry. Sweeping a club-like appendage through the air, it smashed down upon the spot where Alan had been standing half a moment before. Rolling aside, Alan growled, and pulled out a grenade. The explosion might cause friendly damage to his teammates, but he could hardly allow this giant monster to continue its rampage.

Quickly deciding on a course of action, he trained his weapon on the abomination one-handed and sustained a steady stream of fire on a spot on its torso, where two armored plates ended at a thin gap. The creature roared as the hard-light rounds punched a hole through its abdomen, and charged again.

This time, Alan ran forward to meet it, grenade in hand. Activating

the circular explosive at the last moment, he jumped aside even as he threw a punch at the monster. His armored fist smashed through the weakened armor and deposited the grenade within the abomination, before a glancing blow from the creature's arm threw all one thousand pounds of armored Venator aside like a ragged doll.

Dazed, Alan struggled to his feet even as the abomination staggered to a halt and exploded from the inside, flame bursting through the hole in its carapace and incinerating its internal organs. The creature screeched one final time before fire billowed through its mouth and it fell slowly down, dead.

The other aliens seemed undeterred, continuing to throw themselves into the fire-lanes of the ONI team with primitive aggression. Alan limped, an ankle twisted by the awkward landing from the blow that the abomination had dealt him, firing his rifle and making up for his momentary lapse. He slowly made his way next to Scaldman, the civilian looking slightly panicky and his eyes broadcasting terror. The man was obviously extremely scared, but was doing his best to keep it together even though he was defenseless. Alan felt his regard for the man go up a notch, and fired bursts one-handed as he pulled out his sidearm, a projectile-based magnum weapon.

"Take it," he shouted to make himself heard as he handed the weapon to Scaldman grip-first, "Shoot some of the bastards and make yourself useful!"

The scientist nodded bravely, and after fumbling around with the trigger for a few seconds, figured out the pistol's workings and started shooting into the darkness. An alien crumpled with a bullet in its head, sent there more by accident than design, but the civilian looked thrilled and continued to fire, encouraged.

"Atlas! Hurry-", Embers urged as she reloaded.

"It's done," the AI interrupted, "Into the door, I shall lock it once we are within."

The door groaned as they opened, age-old mechanisms prying the door open. Tracker Team held as Embers and Scaldman all but ran into the room, figuring that anywhere was safer than out in a corridor with hordes of vicious, deformed aliens. Backing through the door, the Venator operatives continued to mow down the oncoming crowd of hostiles. Jin, the last one through the door, threw a charge that stuck to the wall on the opposite side of the corridor.

"Atlas, close it now!" she urged, blasting another alien back with her shotgun.

The AI complied, and the doors grinded close. One of the aliens stuck an arm through the quickly closing gap, only to have it crushed by doors with a loud crunch, the appendage jerking in involuntary spasms before finally stilling at the sound of a muffled explosion on the other side of the door.

Before the others could react, Arthur Scaldman ran forward, and with one shot, blew the alien limb apart.

He turned to the rest of the team, pale-faced, and asked, "How did I do?"

"You did fine, Doc, even if that last shot was slightly unnecessary" Alan said, slightly worried for the man, and took the weapon back with an outstretched hands. The doctor did not resist.

Stowing the weapon, he turned to join the rest of the team, who were staring out into the center of the chamber.

The chamber was over fifty meters wide on each of its eight sides, forming a perfect octagon. The room was dark, but for the galaxy swirling through the room, the center precisely aligned with the center of the chamber. Uncountable multitudes of glowing dots, each representing an individual star, floated lazily through the air. Alan stretched a hand out, and was mildly surprised when the stars went straight through his fingers and came out the other side without stopping.

"What is this place?" Scaldman asked, eyes wide with awe, his previous combat shock already forgotten.

"That," Atlas informed them, "Is the Milky Way. From the star-patterns, this map is approximately five hundred years out of date."

\*\*1146 Hours, November 4, 2642 (Unified Earth Calendar)/\*\*

\*\*CAS-Class Assault Cruiser \*\*\_\*\*Unyielding Countenance\*\*\_\*\*,  
Sangheili Fleet of Disillusioned Retribution, Orbit over  
Sanghelios\*\*

Kvas stood as straight as he could, wearing his prized suit of ceremonial armor, carved with lines of intricate script. The polished silver plate would have made him stand out as a target on the battlefield, and was indeed impractical, but it was not meant for combat. While it possessed energy shielding and could take quite a few hits from most weapons, its true purpose was simply to make the Sangheili wearing it look \_good\_.

Kvas did not think of himself as vain. It was true that he enjoyed amenities as much as the next warrior, but he did not revel in them. However, he did take great pride in his possession and maintenance of this particular set of armor. It had been passed down through his keep for many generations, and had seen many historical events in its time.

And hopefully, it would experience another important moment this day. Important to Kvas, at least.

The Last Arbiter himself was arriving to debrief him.

Every youngling born of Sangheili heritage over the last hundred years had grown up knowing the name of Thel 'Vadam, mighty warrior and wise councilor. It had been he who had forged bonds of friendship with the humans, helping to lay the foundations for rebuilding the mighty nation of Sanghelios. It had been he who had fought alongside the SPARTANS of old, they who were said to have been so ferocious upon the field of battle that they had been mistaken for demons, and of whom tales were still whispered among veterans of the Great War. It had been he who had led the charge against the Covenant Remnant,

breaking the back of the San 'Shyuum resistance and personally slaying the Jiralhanae Chieftain Marcabras, who had acted as the Supreme Commander of the False Prophets' dwindling forces. The old warrior was a hero, a living legend. The fact that he was known as an extremely accomplished swordsman had only served to boost Kvas' already lofty opinion of his reputation. Without him, Kvas doubted that the Sangheili race would be half as proud as they currently were, and would most likely still be scrabbling with what remained of the Prophets' forces for what little remained of the old Covenant territories. To say that he admired the old warrior was a gross understatement.

Kvas had heard that the Arbiter was nearing three hundred in human years, old even for the Sangheili. Despite this, the Kaidon refused to retire to a more administrative role, continuing to wear his battle armor proudly and personally overseeing military actions, even if age had restrained him from entering direct combat.

Kvas had seen the Arbiter with his own eyes two times before. Once was when he had newly joined the military, wearing the blue of a Minor along with countless thousands of others. The Arbiter had spoken to them, and told them of the truth of the world. The Covenant had been newly dissolved, and the shock had been still wearing in for some of the warriors, who had grown up listening to the lies of the Prophets. The Arbiter had spoken to them then, reassuring them and reminding them that they had a purpose; to serve the Sangheili people and their allies. By throwing off the chains that the San 'Shyuum had cast upon them, the Sangheili had freed themselves for the first time in thousands of years. Unlimited potential awaited their race, the chance to finally develop and find their own destiny. Kvas had listened attentively, quietly inspired by experienced warrior's confidence and conviction.

The second time he had seen the Arbiter was after he had joined the Special Operations branch. The Arbiter himself had led the assault on the major Prophet stronghold-world of Navokas Minor. Kvas had gazed upon the Arbiter at work from afar, butchering Loyalists in a display of elegant savagery. The bladework he had seen that day had haunted his dreams for many nights after, dancing within his mind, and even to his day, he was unsure if he could hold his own against the skill that the Arbiter had displayed. After all, one did not reach the rank of Supreme Commander by being idle.

And now, the Arbiter was coming to speak to him, face-to-face. Of course, a large part of the reason for this might have had to do with the fact that Laros 'Vadam, the troublesome young Minor, had been accompanying his task force.

Kvas clicked his mandibles in slight annoyance as he thought of the brash warrior. While by no means inexperienced, the Arbiter's son lacked discipline and restraint, a trait common to many warriors that were unfamiliar with the reality of battle. From what he knew, Laros 'Vadam had secretly learned his heritage of being the Arbiter's son when he had listened in upon a conversation between his mother and maternal uncle. Ever since, the youngling had been confident to the point of arrogance, secure in the knowledge that he was a skilled warrior with an extremely famous forebear. Laros 'Vadam had joined the military later than most, preferring to spend his early adulthood learning the arts of combat and dueling other warriors. Kvas could not deny that the warrior was skilled; it was his attitude that he

disapproved of.

Kvas was brought out of his musings as the door to the room slid silently upwards, revealing the armored form behind it.

The Arbiter strode slowly into the room, his steps measured and firm. He wore a battle suit of gold and silver, as befitting a warrior of his status. However, the plated surface of the armor was pitted and worn, obviously having been used in combat many times. The elder Sangheili's skin was starting to become wrinkled and hardened, showing the warrior's age, but his eyes were bright and alert.

Kvas took the initiative, saluting the elder Sangheili, "Councilor. It is an honor to have you aboard this ship. I have long heard of your exploits."

"Commander," the Arbiter greeted him in a gravelly voice, "The honor is mine. It is good to walk in the halls of a well-ordered battleship once more. Come, we have much to discuss. I have heard your reports of Transcendence's madness."

"Yes, Councilor," Kvas bent his neck and bowed his head in respect.

The Arbiter strode next to the central table, upon which a hologram displayed details of the Forty-Second Cohort's engagement with the Loyalist forces, and examined the glowing runes.

"First, tell me of your experience in the Prophet's sanctum," the Councilor said, absently stroking his bottom-right mandible as he spoke, "You said that Transcendence had destroyed all the Forerunner artifacts that he had hoarded within his room?"

"Yes, Councilor," Kvas said, and flicked his hand, switching the hologram display to show the destroyed remains of the Loyalist citadel, "The chamber that Transcendence, or Doom as he renamed himself as, had been filled with Forerunner technology."

Kvas paused here, then continued, "The artifacts had been smeared with blood. Scans from our ships in orbit indicate that the explosion that had destroyed the fortress originated from within Doom's chamber. We could not recover any of them, for the explosion had destroyed them beyond all recognition."

"Thank you, Commander," the Arbiter said, "This gives me much to ponder upon. You must understand, The San 'Shyuum revere the technology of the Old Ones to the point of obsession, and even those that are not devout followers of the Covenant faith would rather die than suffer damage to Forerunner artifacts under their care simply for the immense worth of the technology contained within. Doom must have known the explosion would destroy the items he had collected. For he to destroy them so callously is disturbing."

"I understand," Kvas nodded, "But to understand the winding thoughts of the enemy is not my duty. I find it strange, but the mind of aliens are unknowable."

The elder Sangheili chuckled, "Not strictly true, Commander. While other races doubtlessly think differently from us, it is very possible to understand their motives. The Yig-Yar fight for profit,



the Jiralhanae do so because they enjoy war. However, It is evident from the reports that Doom was insane. We know not how this came to be; the evidence that the humans had given us but a year earlier indicated that Transcendence possessed a healthy mind and strong religious beliefs. Much has changed since then."

The Arbiter continued to question Kvas about the mission, including his opinions of what had happened. Kvas, to his surprise, found that the Councilor was incredibly easy to speak to. Despite his formidable reputation, the Arbiter showed no sign of the arrogance that his son had displayed, and spoke to Kvas with the instinctive ease of soldiers discussing a battle.

"Thank you, Commander," the Arbiter said after Kvas had explained his thoughts on the mission, "I have gleaned much knowledge and insight from this talk."

"As I have said, Councilor, it is an honor indeed," Kvas replied, "My warriors and I have known of your deeds for all of our lives."

"Judge one not by their reputation, Commander," the Arbiter arranged his mandibles in a smile, "Judge them by their actions."

Kvas nodded, respectfully accepting the elder's wisdom.

"There is one more matter I wish to discuss with you before we conclude," the Arbiter continued, "I suspect you may not enjoy this, but I have a request to make."

"Anything, Arbiter," Kvas slowly replied, privately wondering what manner of dangerous mission the Councilor would present him with. He would do his duty, of course, but he had harbored hopes of returning to his keep and visiting his family during the time he spent back on Sanghelios.

"I am putting my son forward as a candidate for the Special Operations branch," the old warrior said, sighing, "And I am hoping that you may accept him into your cohort."

Kvas was stunned. The Arbiter was asking him to take his son into his Cohort?

"If I may ask, Arbiter," he said hesitantly, "Why would you wish this?"

"The young one is headstrong, and I am displeased at how he willfully disobeys orders without thought. He lacks understanding and self-control. Within the body of the normal military, there is little doubt that one day some Fleetmaster would run out of patience and have him discharged. Despite his flaws and the fact that he should not have learnt the identity of his father so young, Laros is my son. I believe he would be able to adapt better to Special Operations, where more flexibility is encouraged. In truth, I have been observing the performance of your Cohort for some time, and after this interview, I am of the opinion that you are a capable leader and warrior. I would be glad to entrust the guidance of my son to an able commander such as you."

Kvas thought about the Arbiter's proposal for a moment. He understood

the older Sangheili's concerns and reasoning, and could find no fault with it.

"I hope I do not regret it, but I do accept this honor, Arbiter. If Laros' name is put forward, I shall claim him for the Forty-Second Cohort."

"It soothes my heart to hear this, Commander," The Arbiter said, once again smiling, "Thank you."

And with a swirl of his cape, the old warrior left.

Kvas looked after him, hoping that he had not just made a mistake.

End  
file.